Showing Up is Just the First Step
by Robbie Samuels, Professional Speaker | Podcast Host | Coach

You probably already know that one of the best reasons to volunteer for your association is to build stronger connections with others in your field. This is true if you are new to the meetings industry, a recent transplant from another region of the country, or planning to switch gears from working in higher ed to medical. There are many unexpected benefits as well...

One of my coaching clients started volunteering for an association and soon after was “tasked” with the job of picking up the speaker at the airport. I quoted the word tasked because it was a true privilege to have 25 minutes of uninterrupted time with a leading professional in her field.

But being in the same car is not the end goal. It’s that she had done her research ahead of time and knew enough about the speaker to engage in a thoughtful conversation. The result? She got advice from the speaker that she was able to incorporate into her next proposal - and it was what made her proposal stand out and her company was selected.

Her original reasons for wanting to volunteer were to share her organizational skills (and be recognized for them), to have a reason to find time to write (something she enjoyed and had stopped doing as life got busy), and, of course, to meet people in her field (she wanted to find kindred spirits who were as enthusiastic as she was about the work).

Her first volunteer role was not even one that was on the list of volunteer openings. She had noticed that the association’s educational files (video, audio, and handouts from previous meetings) were difficult to navigate on the website. She offered to tag each entry so they could be viewed by topic and not just by meeting date. This gave her a reason to review several years worth of content that she would likely have never looked at.

She also agreed to write for their newsletter at least four times a year. She ended up writing a synopsis of what content was available for each category and that was published in the newsletter. She went from no one knowing her to being recognized for her initiative and follow-through, and not even two years later she was asked to join the board.

Meanwhile, her role at her organization has evolved and she’s now up for a promotion. She feels confident that her leadership role at her association was a factor in her success on the job. Her boss can see that she has a lot more to offer than what she was originally asked to do in her role and that others value her contributions.

What are the steps to strategic volunteering?

Identify Your Goals
Make connections that might lead to a job offer? Enhance your experience to make you more hirable? Learn new skills? Share your expertise? Your volunteer role should meet at least some of your goals or you may find yourself less than committed to the work.
Research
Ask around to find out about organizations in your area and what their volunteer needs are. Determine which would be the best match based on your goals. Be open to suggesting a volunteer role that doesn’t yet exist.

Focus
Instead of volunteering once for lots of organizations, focus your volunteer hours so you’re deepening your relationship with just one or two organizations.

Commit
Be dependable. Show up consistently. Do what you said you’d do. Easier said than done, this is where most volunteers fall short. Better to offer less of your time and over deliver than fail to meet expectations.

Lead
When the opportunity arises, step up into a leadership role. It could be as simple as arriving early to set up the room and start the coffee. Earn trust by following through on bigger commitments and then ask for more responsibility.

Showing up at association meetings is the first step, you can’t get far in your career if you never leave your office to meet leaders in your field, but showing up is just the beginning. Strategic volunteering is a great way to make a name for yourself in your industry and a way to give back once you’ve gotten that name recognition.

Robbie Samuels has been recognized as a “networking expert” by Inc. and Lifehacker, and is the author of the best-selling business book Croissants vs. Bagels: Strategic, Effective, and Inclusive Networking at Conferences available at www.CroissantsvsBagels.com.

A professional member of the National Speakers Association, he has been speaking on the topic of inclusive and engaging connections for over a decade. He works with meeting professionals and conference organizers to design experiences that engage all participants, especially first-timers and those attending solo. Learn more about Art of the Schmooze, his signature talk, at www.ArtoftheSchmooze.com.

As a consultant, coach, author, and speaker he shares how to shift your mindset around relationship building, so you discover new connections and business opportunities in the world around you – and know how to act on them.

Listen to On the Schmooze podcast for more networking tips from Robbie and interviews with talented leaders: www.OntheSchmooze.com. Learn more about Robbie and his work at www.RobbieSamuels.com.

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